

The embodied classroom - A phenomenological discussion of the body and the room

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Abstract: A (Western) school is, among other things, a building with its own spatial formations and boundaries. In educational settings, the place for learning, as well as the human body in the place, is significant. In this paper, we explore the theory of the lived body as it was formulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and argue why we think this theory can be used fruitfully in educational research, and specifically in a study of learning places such as classrooms. We also discuss what a classroom *is* and *can be* drawing upon the work of Otto Friedrich Bollnow.

As humans, we access the world through our bodies and the knowledge we develop is always embodied. The body and the world are two aspects of a reversibility, which Merleau-Ponty terms *flesh*. He also stresses that the body *inhabits* the world, and our corporeality can therefore be tied to the room—we are affected by and affect the room in a mutual interplay.

In this paper, we develop this further and argue that teachers and students inhabit the classroom. Corporeality is therefore closely connected to spatiality and is understood as a prerequisite for being involved in relationships. We argue for the importance of exploring the notion of embodiment in educational settings with a special focus on the embodied classroom using the phenomenology of the life-world.

Key words: lived body, embodiment, spatiality, classroom, life-world phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty, Bollnow

Introduction

On a typical day in a typical school, teachers and students are involved in different kinds of learning activities as well as in experiencing social and emotional moods. They are talking, thinking, feeling, reading, hating, writing, dreaming, counting, loving, et cetera. This mix of activities and moods is influenced by many different things and in turn influences many different things. In other words, there is a mutual interplay between human beings and the world.

A (Western) school is, among other things, a building with its own spatial formations and boundaries. Such a place for learning can thus create expectations and opportunities, be inviting to certain activities, and be inspiring. It may also be the opposite and thereby constrain learning. In extent, the place can create or limit opportunities of the formation of the lived body and the lived experience. In that way, the place defines learning and can, in a sense, be seen as a choreography of learning activities. Additionally, the learners influence the place and the learning activities within the place through their embodied presence. The intertwined relationships within the place mutually affect each other.

In educational settings, the place for learning, as well as the human body in the place, is significant. Given this, we explore the theory of the lived body as it was formulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the French philosopher in the field of life-world phenomenology, and connect this theory with learning places—classrooms. On an ontological level, we also discuss what a classroom *is* and *can be*, drawing upon the work of Otto Friedrich Bollnow. Our overall aim is therefore to develop an understanding of the mutual interplay between body and classroom.

Educational phenomenologists have explored the significance of the body in education. Dall’Alba and Barnacle (2007) argue that there is an integrated account of knowing, acting, and being in which mind and body are intertwined, while Alerby (2009) explores learning as embodied experiences. Others (e.g., Alerby & Hörnqvist, 2005; Alerby et al., 2002; Bonnett, 2009, 2013; Dall’Alba & Barnacle, 2005; Gruenevald, 2003) emphasise the significance of places for learning. In this paper, attention is drawn to the mutual interplay between the body and the classroom in education.

Notions of the body

Throughout history, the human body has been understood and discussed in different ways. Alerby (2009) explores how the human body was viewed in connection to education specifically in the 20th century and asserts that, during the breakthrough of behaviourism in the beginning of the 20th century, learning among humans as well as animals was un-

derstood and explained by the model of stimulus-response. This view of the body was based on a naturalistic theory of human behaviour which in turn presumed a causal relationship between physical stimuli and physical reactions. The human body as well as the mind were explained by physical characteristics and the human body was viewed as a machine.

The behaviouristic and naturalistic view was, however, abandoned in favour of a cognitive approach during the 1970s. This approach became quickly dominant, especially in connection to education, and learning came to be explained by cognition. The strong emphasis on cognition resulted in a position that the students risked being viewed as purely cognitive. A problem with that view is that cognition often seemed to function without a body. However, according to Alerby (2009), neither behaviourists nor cognitivists are able to provide a comprehensive exploration of the significance of the body in education. Instead, to find a possible way to explore the human body and its significance in education, we turn to Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty contributes to the field of phenomenology with the development of the notions of the life-world and the theory of the lived body. The notion of the life-world has, among others, been further developed by the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka (1998). The contemporary French philosopher Renaud Barbaras (2004, 2006), has also developed phenomenological ontology in relation to Merleau-Ponty.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the lived body is *both nature and culture, both immanence and transcendence, both facticity and project*. In accordance with the phenomenological movement, he orients away from the dualistic dichotomies of body and mind. Furthermore, he reaches beyond *both and*, towards an intertwining which is more than merely the sum of its parts. For him, humans are intertwined with everything within the world: “the world is wholly inside me and I am wholly outside myself” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 408).

Merleau-Ponty (2002) claims that the body is not thrown in-the-world, as Heidegger terms it. The body is not in space, but *of it*, tied to a certain world through the lived body. We are in our body, and we cannot get out of it—the body is always with us. The lived body is situated in the lived time and the lived space, and geometric space and chronological time are ways to try to imagine and master the life-world. Merleau-Ponty (2002) emphasises that the body *inhabits* the world: “I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them” (p. 162).¹

¹ In the original text the preposition *à (au)* together with both space (*à l'espace*) and time (*au temps*), gives a feeling of how the space and time embrace the body, not just *in* the world, but *à* the world: “je ne suis pas dans l'espace et dans le temps; je suis à l'espace et au temps, mon corps s'applique à eux et les embrasse” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, *Phénoménologie De La Perception*, p.164).

Consequently, a person's existence—the human body—provides the prerequisite for worldly experience.

As humans, we acquire different understandings of our body's relation to the world. It is through the body we are in a living relation to things, and by departing from our own life-world, we can expand the lived body by incorporating things. However, to really incorporate a thing into one's own body, a habit must be formed. Merleau-Ponty (2002) writes: "The acquisition of a habit is indeed the grasping of a significance, but it is the motor grasping of a motor significance" (p. 165). Thereafter, he presents his well-known examples: the woman with the hat, knowing exactly the limits of her extended body including the hat, the driver of a car passing through a narrow opening, the blind man with his stick experiencing the world.

In connection to educational settings, Alerby (2009) explores another example of the human's ability to expand her/his body by incorporating a thing—in this example, a pencil. The pencil constitutes an extension of the child's body and thus makes it possible to write. But when a child holds a pencil for the first time there is a distance between the pencil and the child before a habit has been formed and the pencil is incorporated and has become one with the child's lived body.

Acquiring a habit means changing the world as we know it. It means changing our existence, and through the perceptual habit we acquire the world. The phenomenon of habit as an acquisition of the world connects it, according to Merleau-Ponty (2002), with our notion of understanding and, of course, our body: "To understand is to experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance - and the body is our anchorage in a world" (p. 167).

To summarise, it is through our human experiences that learning is moulded, and these experiences are above all incorporated through the body. As a concept, 'incorporate' derives from the Latin word *incorporo* - i.e., 'embody'- and *corpus* means just 'body' (*Nationalencyklopedin*, 1998). As an intransitive verb, incorporate means 'to unite in or as one body' (Merriam-Webster, 2013). As humans, we use our eyes to view the world, our ears to listen, our mouths to experience different kinds of taste, and our hands to grasp, touch, and feel things or other people, et cetera (Alerby, 2009). Thus, it is through our bodies that we experience the world. This in turn is prerequisite for learning, and it is through the body that we are in a living relation to things, such as a school building or a classroom.

Notions of the classroom

A classroom in a school is often taken for granted; no one questions that a school building has classrooms. But taking something for granted can be a reason to return to the thing itself—in this case, the classroom. Merleau-Ponty (1968) reminds us that we need to interrogate our presumptions through what he describes as hyper-reflection, a critical self-reflection that interrogates its own possibility. So how then can we think about and experience a room? What can a classroom be?

As a spatial formation, the room is the most general form in the world, according to Bollnow (1994), and for him tightness and space stretch beyond the objective room. The formation of a room, e.g. a classroom, is experienced, interpreted, and used in different ways by different people. As humans, we need room; or in other words, we are always situated somewhere—in time and space. Given this, a human being is not only situated as an object in a place. The presence in a place is also followed by a certain attitude of mind. We can distance ourselves from the place or establish ourselves in it, we can feel lost or safe, in harmony with the place or foreign to it (Bollnow, 1994). The place concerns us, since the place is our living space. The objective place, such as a classroom, is, therefore, closely connected to the *lived room*.

There are thus various ways to describe a room. A classroom, for example, can be viewed from many perspectives, perhaps the most prominent is that of its material qualities. However, to understand a room only by its material qualities does not provide a comprehensive view. Furthermore, both functional and aesthetic qualities can be found as well. From a materialistic point of view, a classroom can be understood as matter. A classroom has, e.g., a floor of linoleum, a ceiling of wooden boards, windows of glass, and furniture made of different materials. From an idealistic viewpoint, a classroom can be understood as an idea—one can think about and imagine a classroom. However, to understand a classroom as matter or idea, as well as them both together—*both matter and idea*—gives not a complete understanding of the room. Moreover, the room has a utility quality—a classroom can be used for something by someone. But the utility quality cannot be reduced to the characteristics of matter or idea. Instead, it has to be regarded as a different kind of characteristic, which provides a further dimension of the classroom and furthermore demands a subject experiencing the room. Accordingly, it is not enough to describe the space as geometrical or physical; it must also be described through the human experience of space: ‘Space is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the position of things becomes possible’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 284).

How do the body and the classroom affect each other? How can we understand and describe the relation between our corporeality and the learning place in the form of a classroom?

The mutual interplay between body and room

Within the phenomenology of the life-world, things are always things for someone. The room, for example, requires someone experiencing the room. Langeveld (1983) argues that a physical room, such as a classroom, is perceived in very different ways depending on whether one is a child or an adult, a student or a teacher, and depending on what role one has in this context. How the place is used is, however, not only constituted by spatial formation and special disposition, but also depends on how size, distance, social context, colors, atmospheres et cetera, in the place are experienced. For example, during an ordinary school day, the classroom is filled by the bodies of both teachers and students, and used by them for different learning activities. They experience the room with its possibilities and limitations in different ways due to their position or influence. The teacher might feel the burden of managing to see and support all the students that sit on their chairs behind their desks. New or nervous students may enter the room feeling small in relation to the powerful room, its bare walls, and high ceilings, while expectant and curious students may experience the room as the place where their dreams may be fulfilled. As such, the room also conveys an atmosphere. Those who inhabit the room inscribe the atmosphere with emotions, affects, expectations, and presumptions through their explicit and implicit activities.

Let us return to the physical and concrete matters and materials in the room that speak to the inhabitants. As pointed out, our human actions, as well as our human bodies, are tied together with the formation of the place in a mutual interplay. For example, in a school, each one of all the details—stairs, chairs, schoolyards, rulers, scissors, crayons, and so on—influence how teachers and students think, feel, act, and move. At the same time, teachers and students influence and affect the materials within the intertwined relationship. Merleau-Ponty suggests that: ‘Between the exploration and what it will teach me, between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle, some kinship ... the initiation to and the opening upon a tactile world’ (Merleau-Ponty & Lefort, 1968, p. 133). In connection with education, this line of reasoning means that we are already situated in a place, which also makes learning situated through our embodiment.

In a traditional (Western) classroom, time, space, body, and relations have often been—and still are—strictly regulated, and education, teaching, and learning, are often strictly controlled within the physical room. The natu-

realistic and behaviouristic viewpoints, explored above, produced echoes in the classrooms influencing how education should be organised, and even how school desks should be designed and placed in the room. The design of school desks, as well as how they were placed in the classroom, was a way to control the bodies of the students in order to discipline them, maintain orderliness, and facilitate learning. However, the school desks were designed from a typical type of child's body, where the chair was attached to the table without the ability to adjust relative to the actual body of each child. According to the Swedish regulation plan for school buildings and the design of the classrooms for 1865, the government specified exactly how desks should be placed in the classroom in order to decrease the risk of students physically touching each other—a way to control the bodies of the students. Even though this is not the case in Swedish schools of today, we can raise the question of how the classroom and its furniture are organised. To what extent are the students' bodies bound to the room? To what extent can the students move their bodies in the room?

There are thus always aspects of power in the interplay between body and room. As Merleau-Ponty (1964, 1982, 2000) points out, relations of power are apparent in situations and places where control of human beings is prioritised, when mutual relationships are put aside, and people are objectified in the gaze of the other. In those situations, actions and expressions are not 'taken up or understood, but observed as if they were an insect's...the objectification of each by the other's gaze is felt unbearable only because it takes the place of possible communication' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p.420).

As we mentioned above, the room offers in a sense, a choreographic setting, calling upon the teachers and the students to respond. The four walls limit and shelter them, the chair and the computer form the body by the desk, the desks invite students to activities with hands, and their position renders some things visible, audible, and tangible rather than others. The teachers and students are bound to the place, the room, not just physically (though they are able to leave the room), not just mentally (since they can think about other things), but also beyond this through being in and using the room. The body and the room interplay, but in different ways depending on the room. Regardless of which room, however, it influences the body, and vice versa.

The teacher, as well as the physical room, can in most cases only control the physical presence of the students, not where they mentally are. In a classroom, the windows, e.g., serve both as a dividing line between inner and outer space, and as a way of making the classroom infinite as the horizon of the room extends outward. Even if the students bodily are in the classroom, they can look out of the windows and mentally flee the class-

room, especially if the teacher does not manage to engage the students. If the student is 'using' the window to mentally flee the room, one could state that the window competes with the teacher. One way to avoid that is to cover the window with blinds. But still, shadows beyond the blinds can invite the student even more into a world of imagination (Alerby, 2004). On the other hand, the horizon stretching to the infinite does not necessarily have to be regarded as a mental escape from the learning situation, but can be a way to reflect and consider what has just been said or done.

Another kind of classroom is a learning place beyond the four walls of the physical room. Such a learning place can, for example, be an outdoor setting. Still, lessons taking place outdoors are not free from boundaries, due to the organisation of these lessons. Even though the boundaries are not physical walls, they are constituted by for example dimensions of power and rules. The teacher can, for example, frame this spatial place by setting up mental and physical boundaries that both regulate and secure the student. For example, the students are not allowed to leave the place and just stroll around as they like—a kind of mental boundary in order to secure the safety of the student, but also to maintain order. The environment in itself can also serve as a kind of shelter. In this way, we could say that the shelter provides a sense of belonging, an existential territory and a lived place (Alerby, Hertting & Westman, 2012).

The absence of physical boundaries in the form of walls can facilitate viewing the horizon. In that way, the boundaries of the learning place become infinite. Having the possibility of shifting horizons is significant for learning, whether through the classroom window or outside in the nature. Such openings should not be regarded as a threat or as competitor to the teacher and the learning situation, but as stimulating and creative possibilities for learning.

Another dimension of the body and the room is how the body moves within the room. According to Merleau-Ponty (2002):

a movement is learned when the body has understood it, that is, when it has incorporated it into its 'world', and to move one's body is to aim at things through it; it is to allow oneself to respond to their call, which is made upon it independently of any representation. (p. 160-161).

When entering a classroom in a typical school, we can fairly quickly, and without any major problems, enter the room. Through our experience, we do not have to measure the opening of the classroom door in order to establish whether it is large enough to get through. Nor do we have to control the

space between the desks placed in the room in order to move between them. Instead, this is done relatively automatically and unconsciously. We avoid the corners of the desks and negotiate a turn around some bookshelves without any major concern for accessibility. Therefore, we can say that when we enter the room, in this case a classroom, we dress ourselves in the room (Vilanen & Alerby, 2013).

Consequently, the students, the teacher, the classroom, the desks, the school equipment, the assignment become an entanglement of their bodies and the world, what Merleau-Ponty expresses as the 'flesh of the world' (Merleau-Ponty & Lefort, 1968, p. 248). In his last unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty develops the theory of the lived body to embrace a chiasmic understanding and further introduces the notion of 'flesh' (Merleau-Ponty & Lefort, 1968). Merleau-Ponty argues that different relationships encroach upon each other in a cross-over, a chiasm (Merleau-Ponty & Lefort, 1968). The chiasm is thus presented as an ambiguity without opposites. Westman and Alerby (2012) discuss chiasm in terms of temporality in education, and since time and space are closely related dimensions of human beings' lived experience, we find it a relevant concept for spatiality as well.

One important chiasm is the intertwined relationship between the body and the world. Merleau-Ponty argues that these reversible phenomena, despite their respective differences, mutually affect each other. He describes it himself as 'a presence to the world through the body and to the body through the world, being *flesh*' (Merleau-Ponty & Lefort, 1968, p. 239). The flesh is not a substance as matter or idea. Nor is it a representation for a mind. It is rather an element—comparable to wind and water—as a general thing, or as Merleau-Ponty terms it: "an 'element' of Being" (Merleau-Ponty & Lefort, 1968, p. 139).

The flesh can be compared to a hinge, separating and interlocking at the same time. Or as the translator of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Alphonso Lingis puts it: 'The flesh is the body inasmuch as it is the visible seer, the audible hearer, the tangible touch - the sensitive sensible' (Lingis in Merleau-Ponty & Lefort, 1968, liv.). The flesh is further described as the coiling of the visible upon the seeing body, the audible upon the hearing body, and the tangible upon the touching body. However, Merleau-Ponty mentions flesh in a very concrete, vulnerable way, in another passage: "Yes or no: do we have a body—that is, not a permanent object of thought, but a flesh that suffers when it is wounded, hands that touch?" (Merleau-Ponty & Lefort, 1968, p. 137).

Westman and Alerby (2012) discuss how the intertwined relationships that students can be involved in within a learning event at a specific place function as dynamic and multidimensional educational relationships.

Within this perspective there are no dualisms between, for example, the individual and social, body and mind, human and nature. When it comes to education those intertwined relationships function as educational relationships, thereby a chiasmic be(com)ing may also be seen as a way of understanding learning. In other words, this ongoing process of be(com)ing works through temporal ambiguities and intertwined relationships, and through the flesh—the body of the world—grasped by affective tones (Westman & Alerby, 2012, p. 9).

Accordingly, as humans mutually influence and interplay with each other and everything within their life-world, the place with its materials, matters, peoples, and atmosphere is significant for how we perceive and experience, act and move, as well as for what kind of relationships we have the opportunity to be involved in. As such, this interplay also affects students' learning.

Some concluding remarks - the embodied classroom

School is a place where people arrive, meet, work, and leave. This place is in most countries, at least Western ones, an architectonically formed building with many different dimensions. For example, it is made by humans for humans. The formation of a classroom is experienced, interpreted, and used in different ways by different people, and a classroom gets its significance first when teachers and students experience it, e.g., by looking at it, being in it, and using it. Research has, however, shown that the formation of buildings, and by extension, the formation of classrooms, influences us as human beings (see, e.g., de Jong, 1995; Eriksen, 1996; Skantze, 1989; Stahle, 1999). We, therefore, must recall that humans are not only influenced by the room, but also influence it (Alerby & Hörnqvist, 2005; Alerby et al., 2002).

In accordance with Merleau-Ponty and Bollnow, we have also emphasised that there is a mutual interplay between human beings and the room understood as a *lived room*. The room, such as a classroom, is neither only mental nor purely material, but the concrete experienced reality in all its complexity. The place influences the body as much as the body influences the place. Merleau-Ponty (2002) emphasises that humans inhabit space. Thus we can say that students and teachers inhabit, or embody, the room—the classroom is becoming embodied.

To conclude, life-world ontology includes a pluralistic and integrative view of reality. World and life affect each other mutually in the sense that

life is always worldly and the world is always lived. In this way, life and world are integrated into an intertwining that cannot be separated. As Merleau-Ponty (2002) says: 'the world is not what I think but what I live through' (p xviii).

By highlighting humans' embodied connectedness to the place as a lived place, and developing an understanding of the mutual interplay between body and room, we call for a rethinking of the relationship between body and room as significant in educational settings.

It is, therefore, our hope that the life-world approach, with its openness and humbleness, can be used as a fruitful way to theoretically conceptualise and empirically study different dimensions of learning places, but also the human corporeality within the place. This, in turn, is crucial in order to grasp all the various aspects of human relations to learning places.

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